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Edinburgh University Press
2020-12-16

Oulanne , L-A 2020 , Djuna Barnes and Queer Interiorities . in S P Moslund , M Karlsson Marcussen & M Karlsson Pedersen (eds) , How Literature Comes to Matter : þÿ P o s t - A n t h r o p o c e n t r i c A p p r o a c h e s t o F i c t i o n . E d i n b u r g h U n i v e r s i t y P r e

http://hdl.handle.net/10138/323596

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CHAPTER 7

Djuna Barnes and Queer Interiorities

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Djuna Barnes's modernist works are populated by characters whose essence seems to be in their bodily being rather than in their fictional heads. She invites readers to feel for and with characters who do not open up for internalist psychology. The characters inhabit houses and apartments, yet these spaces seem to lack the stability, safety and continuity commonly associated with dwelling places.[1] The spaces are often decaying and liminal, with windows and doors that are open to the world outside and allow characters to move through.[2] Barnes's domestic spaces host all-female salons, performances and collections of objects, disrupting the tacit expectations of a house filled by a heterosexual family. In the 'stunt' journalism of Barnes's early career, in which she reports about her experience as a test subject in various extreme situations, she pushes the boundaries of both house interiors and the interior of the body, while transgressing gendered norms of behaviour: she dangles by the side of a building while being rescued, spends time in cage with a gorilla, goes to a boxing match – and undergoes force-feeding.

In this chapter, I study interiority both as a psychological condition for the subject and as a structural condition for domestic values, and investigate how it is reimagined in two of Barnes's short stories and one piece of journalism. By 'queer interiorities' I mean Barnes's rewritings of the metaphorical connotations and ideologies attached to the human subject and to house interiors: the normative conception of the subject as a spiritual essence contained within the body and detached from the material reality, and the house interior as the locus of heterosexual relations. I hope to show how paying attention to the materiality and affectivity of both the human body and its spaces of dwelling, as they appear in Barnes's writing, will illuminate the way metaphors and norms rest on lived bodies and spaces and the way they can be challenged in both literary and journalistic means of expression.

I approach the materiality of spaces and bodies in Barnes's work by reading them through the New Materialist idea of networks of permeable material bodies 'intra-acting' in assemblages. Stacy Alaimo's account of 'trans-corporeality' underlines 'the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from "the environment"': how 'the human is always the very stuff of the messy, contingent, emergent mix of the material world' (Alaimo 2010: 2, 11). Karen Barad has coined the therm 'intra-action' to grasp the way human and nonhuman agents not only interact in different constellations but are also constituted in and through them (Barad 2007: 33). To bring the ideas of bodily permeability, interconnectedness and emergence closer to the domains of the affective and the experiential, I turn to Jane Bennett's discussion of agency in affective assemblages. Bennett uses the Deleuzean notion of assemblages to describe a similar emergent agency and foreground its affectivity: human and nonhuman bodies that simultaneously affect and are affected produce a force 'distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone' (Bennett 2010: 24). Furthermore, I draw on the way Bennett's work challenges the notion of 'life' as something tied to an individual (human) subject.

I propose a 'reading of affective materialities' that is akin to the version of 'surface reading'[3] drafted by Rita Felski: an 'embodied mode of attentiveness that involves us in acts of sensing, perceiving, feeling, registering and engaging' (Felski 2015: 176), with focus on the affective and performative potential of the text and the materialities it depicts rather than their possible hidden meaning. Accordingly, I use of the notion of the reader to refer to a being implied by the text, but one whose reading requires the basic cognitive processes defined by our situatedness as material bodies in a material world.[4] While this conception of a reader is rather universal, we also need to remember that sociocultural norms affect the meanings of materialities for different bodies, which is why I will draw on feminist and queer phenomenology to pay attention to the normativity of domestic and subjective interior spaces.

Feminist phenomenologist Iris Marion Young notes that for women and feminists, the house and the home can be conflicted spaces that offer both confinement and security:

> If house and home mean the confinement of women for the sake of nourishing male projects, then feminists have good reason to reject home as a value. But it is difficult even for feminists to exorcise a positive valence to the idea of home. (Young 2005: 123)

According to Sara Ahmed, who takes a queer approach to phenomenology, homes tend to be more welcoming to certain bodies, and to be furnished with heteronormative ideas of life. A queer orientation can manifest as a disturbance in the stability of the domestic space: 'Homes too can be "giddy" places where things are not always held in place' (Ahmed 2006: 9). These accounts are helpful in studying how the cultural meanings of interior domestic spaces intermingle with the concrete and lived material spaces depicted by the texts.

Together, the New Materialist and phenomenological approaches address the multiple intra-actions between the material and cultural spheres and the human and nonhuman bodies that populate Barnes's texts. The aim of my readings is to investigate not only how select theoretical approaches can shed light on unnoticed characteristics of a singular literary text, but how literary, creative language use can contribute to addressing theoretical issues. I ask how descriptions of material house interiors and bodies and the metaphorical expressions drawing on them interact in the process of reading Barnes's texts, and how the descriptions and metaphors contribute to rethinking tacit understandings attached to interiority in general. My reading of metaphors revisits the basic argument of cognitive metaphor theory: that the tacit everyday metaphors we use have their roots in our mixture of embodied and cultural being in the world (Lakoff and Johnson 2003), and that poetic, 'new' metaphors result from the creative use of the same resources (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 139; Lakoff and Turner 1989). Combining this understanding with the insight from New Materialist and feminist approaches, I suggest that metaphors that rely on house and body interiors in literary, journalistic and theoretical texts alike can enforce but also challenge 'hardened' norms and ideologies – sometimes within one and the same text. My reading shows that Barnes's use of concrete and metaphorical materialities to distribute agency and affectivity and dethrone the human subject also affords a queer vision of life and relations and surpasses the restrictive bounds of heteronormativity. What I call the 'indifference' of the text to anthropocentrism invites a shift of perspective that also shows the impermanence and malleability of sociocultural norms.

'Dusie' (1927), a story depicting a drama of love and deception between four women in an all-female salon, with abundant spatial description and thing-like characters, is the first example of how the queering of domesticity relies on an embodied and material reimagining of subjective interiority. In my reading, I will focus on how the unconventional use of spatial and bodily metaphors in the story challenges patriarchal and heteronormative values. 'Finale' (1918), a descriptive account of a family

gathered around the coffin of the dead father, invites the study of how metaphors of subjective interiority interact with the description and narration of material bodies intra-acting in material spaces, and how they are used to rethink what constitutes human subjectivity and life. Finally, I will read 'How It Feels to be Forcibly Fed' (1914), a journalistic text that uses a mixture of conventional metaphors and affective evocations of materiality to describe the experience of being bound to a hospital bed and force-fed with a rubber tube. I suggest that this text, like Barnes's fiction, 'queers' metaphors of subjective and spatial interiorities, but that it also provides meta-reflection on the political and ethical potential of telling a story of affective, embodied experience with their help.

Undomesticated Space and Affective Bodies

Mary Wilson has called Barnes's writing 'unhoused fictions', in which, according to her,

> Homes and sentences appear as collections of objects that accumulate meaning through the very fact of the collection. No character ever feels at home in these spaces, which alternately display the collection like a museum or invite performance like a vaudeville stage. (Wilson 2011: 431)

Wilson suggests that Barnes's destabilisation of domestic space entails a questioning of the validity of stable (gender) identity as an objective. The disrupted domesticity aligns with a queer politics of space. According to Ahmed, the arrangements of the home and its furnishings reveal presumptions of how life should be organised. Paying attention to furniture can lead to seeing what is normative or 'queer' about it, as it ceases to remain in the background of habitual human action (2006: 168). Barnes's fictional furnishings, when read not only with their object functions and symbolic meanings but also and especially with their materiality in mind, certainly demand a position in the foreground. The destabilisation of spatial interiors affects the anthropocentric categorisations of subjectivity as well as the norms of gender identity and sexuality.

'Dusie' is part of a cycle of stories situated in Paris, narrated by a young cosmopolitan woman called Katya to someone she refers to as 'madame'. In 'Dusie', Katya's story features Madame K–, who hosts an all-female salon in her home. Among its frequent visitors are Dusie, a young woman who has a love affair with Madame K–, and Clarissa, whom Madame K– regards with indifference. The story moves from the description of the house and the central characters to the narration of events occurring on a rainy night, when Madame K– is away, and Dusie asks Katya to stay the night because she is afraid. As they

lie in bed talking, Clarissa enters, and Dusie shoos Katya away; from another room, through sleep, Katya overhears a discussion that she does not repeat in the story. In the morning she hears Dusie crying, and enters her room simultaneously with Madame K– to see Dusie lying mute and helpless on the bed with a 'crushed', bleeding foot – it remains unclear what has happened. The story ends with Katya's enigmatic comment about how she is already forgetting the story: 'it is so in Paris; France eats her own history, *n'est-ce-pas* [*sic*], madame?' (Barnes 1996: 410)

The story moves from a brief characterisation of Dusie[5] to the house and to Madame K–. The lengthy description of the house interior creates the effect of a flood of nonhuman bodies:

> There were many chrysanthemums, and a long white harp in the embrasure of the window, and in the dust lying upon it many women had written 'Dusie.' And above all, in an enamelled cage, two canaries, the one who sang, and the one who listened. But in the boudoirs there was much pink, and everything was brittle and glazed and intricate. Ribbons dangled from everything and bon-bons were everywhere, and statuettes of little boys in satin breeches, offering tiny ladies in bouffant skirts, fans and finches and flowers, and all about in the grass were stuck shiny slinking foxes. A thin powder was over everything upon the dressing table, mauve and sweet smelling, and a great litter of *La Vie Parisienne* and *Le Rire*, and when you picked up the most solemn looking volume, engravings of Watteau fell out and Greuze, and in the hall a tall clock tinkled and rang. (1996: 404–5)

The description evokes a rococo aesthetic, with a dose of baroque abundance, emphasised by repeating denominators like 'very', 'many', 'much', 'everything', 'everywhere' and 'tall'. The method of listing foregrounds individual things, from ribbons to chrysanthemums to harps to statuettes to engravings, while the description binds them together as a mass by the signs of decay and the all-encompassing dust and powder, which suggests a collection of things in a museum-like space. As the house becomes a scene of action, Wilson's comparison of a theatre seems equally apt: the things are staged, 'pretending' to be in everyday use. They are also 'misused': the women write on the harp, and potentially valuable art objects are kept between cheap magazines or fall on the floor. The female space of the house substitutes a patriarchal version of domesticity, and the space is queered in this way by the way the women use it. Following Ahmed:

> Queer furnishings support proximity between those who are supposed to live on parallel lines, *as points that should not meet*. A queer object hence makes contact possible. . . . The contact is bodily, and it unsettles that line that divides spaces as worlds, thereby creating other kinds of connections where unexpected things can happen. (2006: 69, emphasis in the original)

By explicitly describing an all-female quasi-domestic space and as well as implying sexual relationships between the women housed by it, 'Dusie' rewrites the heterosexual connotations of a home and makes its objects queer.

In an affective, New Materialist reading, another kind of spatial destabilisation can be observed. Even though the nonhuman stuff described acquires meaning from human activities of art, journalism, collection and entertainment, the length of the catalogue dwarfs the preceding and subsequent descriptions of human subjects. The flood of things is posed as an assemblage with an affective vitality of its own, produced by its up-front positioning and length, the rapid succession of things in its list form, and the choice of verbs and adjectives with repeating phonetic patterns that evoke glow and a quivering movement: 'brittle', 'glazed', 'dangled', 'slinking', 'tinkled'. Although there are living creatures, like the canaries, and signs of human actions, like the 'you' picking up the books or magazines and the writing in the dust, the sense of liveliness rests on the material richness of the uneven whole. The difference between dead and lively matter is further blurred by the evocation of sounds, produced both by the living canary and by the clock. The space is not observed from any one human point of view even though the description relies on Katya's experience: the positioning of the things 'everywhere' rather than in specific locations and the aesthetic of listing create the sense of an aperspectival interior that exists for its own sake (Stanica 2014), or for the sake of a variety of bodies coming together. The fictional space thus allows for unexpected forms of contact not only between human bodies, but also between nonhuman ones, putting the normative subjectivity and domestic space in a shaky position.

If the list and the aperspectival description above imply the displacement of human interiority, the following description of the main inhabitant of the house makes this explicit:

> Madame K– was large, very full and blond. She went with the furniture as only a childless Frenchwoman can. She had been a surgeon, a physician, but nothing remained of it, only the tone of her voice when she was angry; then she removed the argument within the exact bounds of its sickness. When there was talk of spiritual matters, and there is always such talk, madame, when women, many women, are closed up together in a room, she listened, but she let you know definitely that she was mortal. (1996: 405–6)

Madame K– is first described as to her physiognomy, and her human status is destabilised by the expression 'went with the furniture': instead of the furniture reflecting the character, she follows its style, form and

location. We learn about her past profession and some of her characteristics, but Katya's observations remain on a behavioural and externalised level. They are rendered in artful phrases accompanied by a gnomic present ('as only a childless Frenchwoman can'; 'there is always such talk'), all of which (as well as the presence of 'madame' as the narratee) keeps the reader emotionally and psychologically at a distance from the character described. Katya does not speculate about personal psychology but describes a general state of affairs matching the state of material things just before. Madame K–'s declaration of mortality as an antidote to spirituality suggests the illusoriness of the idea of a spirit detached from the body. Thus, the text extends the impersonality and undomesticity of the container-like interior space to the woman who denies her spiritual interiority. Nevertheless, the character retains agency and affective potential in what she does and how she relates to the space and the things and bodies surrounding her. While the passage highlights her unconventionality (a childless, educated, intellectual woman gathering other women around her), it also tempts a re-evaluation of conventional ways of reading any human character.

The same applies to Katya's description of Dusie, which likens the character not only to things but to space:

> For that is the way it was with Dusie always. All people gave her their attention, stroking her, and calling her pet or beast, according to their feelings. They touched her as if she were an idol, and she stood tall, or sat to drink, unheeding, absent. You felt that you must talk to Dusie, tell her everything, because all her beauty was there, but uninhabited, like a church, *n'est-ce-pas* [*sic*], madame? Only she was not holy, she was very mortal, and sometimes vulgar, a ferocious and oblivious vulgarity. (1996: 406, emphasis in the original)

If Dusie is like a container, there is nothing inside her. Katya also reports that 'when I asked her what she was thinking, she would say "nothing"' (1996: 407). Yet she remains capable of expression and of affecting other bodies. She emerges in physical contact with others, who touch her and talk to her and write her name on the surfaces of the space. Using the similes of the church and the idol creatively, the text lays bare the 'conceptual metaphors' (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 3) for a human subject: a body 'filled' with the stuff of the spiritual or the material, as when liquid or air fills a container. The 'new metaphors' Barnes uses to describe Dusie deviate not only from the norm of a heterosexual body, but also from the normative depiction of the human body as filled with spiritual being. Barnes's presentation of a queer body as a dehumanised one is not unproblematic, but her descriptions of the embodied humans and the lively material space

invite the realisation of the arbitrariness of norms inscribed on spaces, and replace them with affectivity that does not discriminate between bodies. In this way, a reading of affective materialities in a story like 'Dusie' can contribute to both queer and post-anthropocentric aims, even though the two may not automatically be aligned.[6]

Ideologies of domesticity, human relations and the mind–body relation rely on conceptual, spatial metaphors (home as the protection and continuity of the heterosexual family; space and things as background and support for human subjects and their normative relations; the human body as the container of the mind). Barnes's text invites its reader to engage with these metaphors in an affective textual assemblage of imaginable materialities, and offers the possibility to use this material to reimagine them. Barnes's descriptions play with but are ultimately indifferent to the restrictive cultural norms that regulate human relations. Instead they offer a basis of affectivity that enables a variety of encounters, including ones ignored by both anthropocentric and heteronormative ideologies.

Description, Action and Life

If the predominant mode of 'Dusie' is descriptive, this is even more true of 'Finale', a considerably shorter story also set in a domestic space. Its extradiegetic, third-person narrator describes a room with the body of a man lying at its centre in an open casket, surrounded by candles and a mourning, kneeling family, which consists of the man's wife, mother, a daughter and a son – a patriarchal and heteronormative assemblage of human bodies. From the start the description foregrounds the interplay of stagnancy and change:

> The body had been duly attended to. The undertaker had pared the nails, put the tongue back in the mouth, shut the eyes, and with a cloth dusted with bismuth had touched the edges of the nostrils. It had been washed and dressed and made to assume the conventional death pose – the hands crossed palm over knuckles. Everything else in the room seemed willing to go on changing – being. He alone remained cold and unwilling, like a stoppage in the atmosphere. (1996: 232)

The human body described is the one part of the assemblage that has, according to the description, stopped 'changing' and 'being', and has become the passive locus of conventions and other people's symbolic actions, frozen in the 'death pose'. Yet a corpse is certainly still 'changing', namely decomposing, and thus continues a material life of its own, in trans-corporeal intra-actions with its environment. Indeed, the rest

of the story contradicts the idea of a 'lifeless' body as removed from the relational change and being of the world.

Although the narrator ascribes emotions to the human characters, their presentation foregrounds visible expression and bodily postures whereby readers are invited to see them primarily as affective bodies in an assemblage, rather than as examples of psychological interiority. The wife cries heavily, 'resting the middle of her breasts on the hard side of the coffin boards', the mother cries with some more 'comfort' that the narrator attributes to her having 'seen both the beginning and the end', while the children's attention wanders: the girl wants to look at her damp palms and the boy indulges in a pleasurable memory of rubbing his head against a nurse's arm (1996: 232–3). The narrator keeps returning the attention to the body, or to an impersonal gnomic statement, casting the family as expressive statues or mute actors in a *tableau vivant*, which also makes them comparable to the conventional pose of the dead man. Furthermore, the narrator attributes the 'mental' phenomenon of will to 'things' (the 'everything' also repeated in 'Dusie') and a dead body: '*everything* else in the room seemed *willing* to go on changing . . . he alone remained cold and *unwilling*'.

The assemblage also includes a scarf, the man's 'dearest possession', a memento of a possible romantic encounter received from a woman in Italy: 'It was a lovely thing, but much treasuring had lined it; and the marks of his thumbs as they passed over it in pleasant satisfaction had left their tarnish on the little spots of gold' (1996: 233). The scarf carries traces of memory and pleasure, which could be read as pointing towards human life – yet in my reading, 'life' is not commensurate with interior psychology or even the journey from birth to death pictured as an arch or a trajectory. The scarf is the carrier of traces of the man's actions and feelings, but it is its materiality that has invited the gestures of treasuring, which in turn have become part of the man's bodily and affective life. This imaginable materiality is also capable of affecting readers of the story. The liveliness of the scarf and 'everything' else in the room suggests not only that the material and the human are interconnected, but that we reconsider the notion of 'life'.

Following Bennett's interpretation of Deleuze, this could be read as an example of '*a* life' in the indefinite singular. This life is not personal or individual: it is a 'restless activeness, a destructive-creative force-presence that does not coincide fully with any specific body' (2010: 54, 57; Deleuze 2001). A life is not dependent on human consciousness or a human lifespan, with its (hetero)normative ideals of significant signposts (see Ahmed 2006: 90–2). A sense of an 'immanent life carrying with it the events or

singularities that are merely actualized in subjects and objects' (Deleuze 2001: 29) sneaks into 'Finale' in its descriptions of the nonhuman or 'lifeless' elements of the space. Further, I suggest that life thus considered does not actually need the categories of subjects and objects to actualise. This becomes apparent in Bennett's vital materialist interpretation that points out immanent 'life' equally in the flashes of action in human bodies as in the persistent agency of things beyond the human conception of matter and time, such as grains of metal. Besides carrying traces of a human life story and a love affair, we may suggest that the scarf has a life of its own as a body with the affective power to contribute to emerging events. As a fictional thing, it carries the potential to affect readers' embodied experience of the story and their subsequent interpretation of it. Barnes uses the device of omniscient narration to introduce this nonhuman life to readers, passing by the consciousness of human characters. Like the flood of things in 'Dusie', the thing-life of the scarf asks to be recognised as independent of the conventional story of love and infidelity with its reserved roles for male and female subjects, and thereby it may evoke a potential reality not governed by those norms.

At its very end the story introduces another nonhuman agent, as it moves briefly from the descriptive mode that renders the elements of the scene into a narrative one that reports action:

> A large rat put his head out of a hole, long dusty, and peered into the room. The children were going to rise and go to bed soon. The bodies of the mourners had that half-sorrowful, half-bored look of people who do something that hurts too long. Presently the rat took hold of the scarf and trotted away with it into the darkness of the beyond. One thing only had the undertaker forgotten to do; he had failed to remove the cotton from the ears of the dead man, who had suffered from earache. (1996: 233)

The first and third sentences narrate present events and have the rat as their subject, while the sentences reserved for the mourning human bodies state the way things are, anticipate or recall future or past action. As in 'Dusie', this action appears as a gnomic 'matter of course' rather than the result of interior psychological developments: the children will rise because they are told to, because it is customary, or because their bodies hurt. The random occurrence of the undertaker's forgetting only gives rise to more description, and the rat's actions in stealing the scarf do not have any more psychological motivation than the actions of the human characters. The rat as an agent is indifferent to the love story (or life story) attached to the thing. The presence of the scarf continues in the material 'beyond' into which the rat drags it, beyond the death

of the 'subject' of a story in which the scarf never quite played the part of a passive 'object'. The actions thus appear as emergent effects of a process, in which subjective interiority supported by the domestic space is of little consequence; what is contained by the space is an impersonal event in which human bodies are intermeshed with thing-bodies, one as lively as the other.

The story asks its reader to dwell on the 'surface' of material appearances, to register both the rat's swift movements and the postures and physical feelings of human and nonhuman bodies. It attributes a mind-dimension either to none of them or to 'everything' in a way that may cause confusion in readers, especially if the story is read within a psychologising framework. The central subject of the narrative action is actually the rat; yet its signifying and affective potential rests on the whole assemblage and the minor, intra-active events of being and changing that take place within it. The story presents trans-corporeal relations as crucially affective and experientially relevant to readers, binding human-centred phenomenology with an interest in agential and affective distribution. It portrays a *tableau* curiously *vivant* of a deceptively 'normal' family gathering, where things and bodies are in fact askew: the 'head' of the family has become a passive thing, and the women and children are joined by a rat and a scarf, whose participation in the scene shows more 'life' than any of the human bodies, living or dead – it could also be likened to a still-life that will not keep still. The dear possession of the man is shown as having possessed him, and the shape of the situation in the material space is presented as a force acting on human bodies living and dead. However, the sociocultural norms that partly regulate the human bodies do not govern the life of the nonhuman ones. The extension of the sense of 'life' beyond the human story suggests the arbitrary makings of any normative life story.

The final detail of the cotton in the corpse's ear evokes a sense of the interior of the body, but, again, a physical rather than a spiritual interior. The cotton is incorporated in the body as a vehicle of trans-corporeal interactions. According to Alaimo (2010: 11, 28), the physical permeability of the human body and the presence of nonhuman elements in its interior is rarely experienced directly, but can be revealed to startling effect with the help of scientific enhancements of perception, which in turn can be elaborated on in literary expression. However, I suggest that literary language itself, as an arena for the creative use of metaphors and modes of narration and description, may challenge readers to rethink their tacit understanding of enclosed and insular humanity, even without the aid of scientific instruments. The efficacy of this kind of language

for challenging anthropocentric or heteronormative ideologies is subject to debate. In the fictional texts read above, both aims are by-products of other, aesthetic objectives that ask readers to imagine a reality indifferent to conventional norms and thereby to see arrangements of things and people in a new light. Barnes's journalism shares some of these aesthetic qualities, as it prefers the affective presentation of experience to direct arguments. It also explicitly reflects on the effects of affective reading as a means of producing insight. Thus her journalistic texts can be read as a commentary on the way her fiction produces affective responses and critical insights relying on bodies, spaces and normativity.

How Does it Feel?

Barnes's most famous journalistic experiment, 'How It Feels to Be Forcibly Fed', is part of a series of stunt journalism that she wrote for the *New York World Magazine*. Barnes enacts the contemporary ordeal of British suffragettes, many of whom were imprisoned and protested against not being recognised as political prisoners by going on hunger strike. Prisons responded to their efforts by force-feeding them, a practice that resulted in suffering and permanent damage to their health. For the article, Barnes has a doctor and assistants bind her to a table and repeat a similar procedure.

Kate Ridinger Smorul (2015) and Rebecca Loncraine (2008) note that in the early 1900s stunt journalism was a means for women to gain space for journalistic expression beyond the women's pages. According to Loncraine, stunt journalists used their bodies, performances and experiences to get a story: 'In her stunt journalism, Barnes' body is the subject of the news. Her body is put on display as protagonist, subject and illustration' (2008: 158).[7] Indeed, Barnes does not undertake a thorough explanation of what is happening to suffragettes in Britain, but foregrounds the sensory experience of 'how it feels'. Neither does she underline the political or ethical aims of her investigation. However, one aim seems to be to evoke embodied empathy, an understanding of 'what-it-is-like' that can only be achieved experientially, following philosopher Daniel Hutto:

> The only way to understand 'what-it-is-like' to have an experience is to actually undergo it or re-imagine undergoing it. Gaining insight into the phenomenal character of particular kinds of experience requires *practical* engagements, not theoretical insights. This kind of understanding 'what-it-is-like' to have such and such an experience requires responding in a way that is enactive, on-line and embodied or, alternatively, in a way that is re-enactive, off-line and imaginative – and still embodied. (Hutto 2006: 52)

At the very start of the piece, Barnes purports a form of understanding that relies on embodied experience: 'For me it was an experiment. It was only tragic in my imagination. But it offered sensations sufficiently poignant to compel comprehension of certain of the day's phenomena' (1989: 174–5). Barnes clearly understands the performative nature of her stunt, a fictional tragedy that is more like the crushed foot in 'Dusie' or the death of the nameless man in 'Finale' than an actual occurrence of violent injustice; yet she expects that the experiment will 'compel comprehension' of the contemporary issue, implying that what is needed for this comprehension is a bodily re-enactment of the experience of her 'English sisters' (1989: 175). The comprehension may also extend to readers through their capacity to re-enact the ordeal through the text. The text is an experiment in aesthetics and politics as well as in empathy: the question is not only 'how it feels' but also 'how to tell about how it feels', and what the consequences of this telling are.

By calling the ordeal 'familiar to my sex at this time' (1989: 175), Barnes creates a community of 'sisters' with an implied readiness for understanding her experience, imagining a space for contact between women affected by the issue, or perhaps by other forms of patriarchal power. She queers the event in a joking aside to this implied audience: as she lies on the table 'in as long and unbroken lines as any corpse', she notes that 'this, at least, is one picture that will never go into the family album' (1989: 176). As in 'Finale', the materiality and interconnectedness of the human body and the presence of death disrupt the normativity represented by the family and the album as a symbol of genealogy and continuity (see Ahmed 2006: 89–90).

The description of the actual force-feeding merges technical and physical details with acute experiences of pain:

> He had inserted the red tubing, with the funnel at the end, through my nose into the passages of the throat. It is utterly impossible to describe the anguish of it. . . . Unbidden visions of remote horrors danced madly through my mind. There arose the hideous thought of being gripped in the tentacles of some monster devil fish in the depths of a tropic sea, as the liquid slowly sensed its way along innumerable endless passages that seemed to traverse my nose, my ears, the inner interstices of my throbbing head. Unsuspected nerves thrilled pain tidings that racked the area of my face and bosom. They seared along my spine. They set my heart at catapultic plunging. (Barnes 1989: 177)

Barnes notes the 'impossibility' of describing the experience of pain, yet attempts it with the help of imaginary visions and affective body parts. Partly, the description portrays the body as passive in its physicality: 'I had lapsed into a physical mechanism without power to oppose or

resent the outrage to my will' (1989: 178). However, the whole experience leads to the act of telling about how it feels to suffer and to resist and attributes pain and activity to parts of Barnes's body. The autobiographical body she describes, like the bodies in her stories, retains its agency as potential to express and affect, even when faced with the impossibility of describing the experience 'as it is'.

The text uses conventional metaphors, yet most turn out to be repetition with a difference, as in her fiction. Before lying down on the table, Barnes describes her dread: 'my soul stood terrified before a little yard of red rubber tubing' (1989: 175). She locates the feeling of fear in her 'soul', yet attributes to the soul the bodily posture of standing and evokes the 'thing-power' of the rubber tube; in the excerpt the 'soul' is separate from the tube, but the piece as a whole thrusts them together, as the tube invades the residence of the soul. She writes, following a customary dualist metaphor, that 'the spirit was betrayed by the body's weakness' (1989: 178), but picks up a more poetic and trans-corporeal one when she describes the operating table as 'pregnant with the pains of the future' (1989: 175). Similarly, when Barnes deliberates on the possibility of affective and bodily empathy, the metaphors become mixed:

> If I, playacting, felt my being burning with revolt at this brutal usurpation of my own functions, how they who actually suffered the ordeal in its acutest horror must have flamed at the violation of the sanctuaries of their spirits. (1989: 178)

I suggest that this polyphony of metaphors is partly due to the rhetorical genre of the piece. An article in a popular magazine may call for conservative expressions such as the spirit betrayed by the body's weakness, and the interior of the body as the 'sanctuary' of spirit. The more ambiguous metaphors of the piece recall the ways Barnes's stories highlight the materiality of bodies: her soul trembling before a rubber tube, her 'being' burning with revolt while her 'functions' are usurped, a table 'pregnant' with fear. Barnes is clearly not actively seeking expression for a precociously post-anthropocentric vision of the human mind and body, but the complexity of the experience the piece is trying to convey seems to require a blend of familiar and creative expressions. Even the traditionally dualistic metaphors become slightly askew in the context of the violent phenomenon described. In an affective reading of material surfaces, it is necessary to see the metaphors of the body as a (weak) temple of the soul as parallel with the concrete, material images of rubber tubing entering the cavities of that same body. Similarly, the image of the body as a corpse pairs with the descriptions of lived pain and struggle.

The metaphorical images have the potential to shift tacit meanings attached to the body and the mind. They present a material reality indifferent to oppressive norms, yet also directly and painfully affected by them. Thus the text has at least partly succeeded in conveying the 'what-is-it-like' of the body as a material, affective entity permeated by and intra-acting with the material world around it. This imagery likens Barnes's narrated body not only to the corpse in 'Finale' but also to the fictional body of Dusie as an empty, mortal and vulgar church.

It is debatable whether Barnes's 'playacting' helps the cause of suffragettes. Its intention seems to be more aesthetic and ethical than political, content with raising consciousness and presenting effective images:

> I saw in my hysteria a hundred women in grim prison hospitals – while white-robed doctors thrust rubber tubing into the delicate interstices of their nostrils and forced into their helpless bodies the crude fuel to sustain the life they longed to sacrifice. (1989: 178)

This vision posits bodily experience as not only a form of empathy but also a form of knowledge. Loncraine notes the 'bodily reality' of the 'gruesome details' of the descriptions, which blurs the line between pretence and experience (2008: 166). I read the performative piece as an attempt to show the lived pain induced by an 'objective' procedure of medical and correctional biopower. It displays the body undergoing the experience as an active agent rather than a passive object, complicating the attribution of victimhood to bound and force-fed female bodies. This happens in part via the deconstruction of internalist, psychological or spiritual notions of subjectivity observed in all the texts analysed.

The blend of material and metaphorical expressions in the piece grasps the lived experience of bodily pain and relationality in a way that a medical report could not, thereby actually surpassing the potential of scientific instruments that Alaimo sees as necessary for perceiving trans-corporeality. An appropriately phrased metaphorical passage from Audre Lorde meditates on the bodily practices of resistance and silencing:

> What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies that you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? (Lorde 1980 quoted in Alaimo 2010: 21)

Alaimo notes that this should not only be read as a generalised call to refuse to be silenced but also in the context of 'personal and

psychological' experiences of illness: 'personal experience cannot be directly reckoned with, not only because discourse shapes experience, but also because an understanding of the self as material, trans-corporeal, and emergent entity often demands the specialized knowledge of science' (2010: 86). I hope to have shown that Barnes's experiment and the story she tells of it may offer a further mode of 'understanding' and 'knowledge' that can be phenomenological without being 'personal' or 'psychological', as conceptions of agency and life are extended beyond these denominators.

At the end of the piece, Barnes foregrounds the fictionality of the experience by assuming that the doctor 'had forgotten all but the play' and by describing the assistants leaving, 'having finished their minor roles in one minor tragedy' (1989: 179). Yet the text implies a belief in a possibility to share with her readers something of the experience that the medical professionals, here acting more as wielders of biopower than providers of an enhanced means of seeing the body, have missed. The actual political efficacy of the act may be slight, but it does succeed in creating a form of knowledge perhaps inaccessible to other means of expression. The material permanence and affective potential of the medium of writing is likely to enable readers to carry with them more than the doctor in the piece does: fresh words for the experiences of 'swallowing tyrannies' and resisting them in the physical space of the lived body.

Conclusion

In a letter to Emily Coleman recently quoted by Elizabeth Pender and Cathryn Setz, Barnes comments on a review of her novel *Nightwood* (1936) that complained about its lack of 'cheer': 'Split the most beautiful woman in half and is it cheering in his sense? No. In mine yes, to see the guts and gall and heart embroiled in that pit out of which beauty broiled' (Pender and Setz 2019: 1).[8] The comment exemplifies both her interest in the grotesque physicality of the body and her propensity for the creative use of metaphors. These characteristics make her writing engage in conversation with a reading that shows how her metaphorical language uses the experience of the material world to challenge tacit understandings of human life and subjectivity. Barnes reimagines fictional characters as material bodies whose interiority is physical rather than symbolic, attributes 'lives' to nonhuman things and rewrites interior spaces as unhomely yet active players in the unfolding of a story. Her texts invite readers to engage with lively material things, emergent

occurrences and bodily sensations that push aside grand narratives centred around exclusively human relations and especially heteronormative ones. They use the creative power of language to reorganise the imagination of the world by rewriting metaphors rooted in the material world.

I propose an affective reading of materialities as a potential space where the queer and feminist phenomenological study of bodies, spaces and normativity can meet post-anthropocentric efforts to rethink mind/life/matter divisions. These approaches converge around questions of how to define subjects and objects, what is encompassed by a life, and what kind of communities and empathic relations can be constructed in and by different spaces. A queer phenomenological reading can point out the exclusive or oppressive qualities of a fictional space or the possibility for queer forms of contact it affords; a New Materialist one can turn away from anthropocentric interpretations and point out the agency of nonhuman fictional bodies and their intra-action with and permeation of human bodies. Both heteronormative and anthropocentric ideologies reside in tacit expressions, and slight alterations to these expressions may open up new ways of experiential understanding that reveal a plural, vibrant world of connections. While challenging the hegemony of the human subject, a reading of affective materialities also supports the aim of queer phenomenology by surpassing the restrictions carved in lived space by sociocultural norms and helping us imagine beyond them, while recognising the affective load carried by material spaces and things.

I suggest that Barnes's texts solicit comprehension of a variety of phenomena addressed by both theoretical approaches. This comprehension is of a material and affective kind and does not necessarily create or invite propositional knowledge. The form of experience the stories evoke is impersonal and non-psychological, which is why a reading focused on materiality and affectivity is needed to grasp them. Barnes's celebration of cutting a beautiful woman in half should perhaps not be read as an invitation to a probing reading that seeks to reveal the symbolic and symptomatic meanings below the surfaces of bodies, including the body of the text. It supports the reading of interiority as a physical yet affective space removed from the psychological and the spiritual: what is contained by human as well as by domestic interiorities is more materiality, more surfaces. In the margin of the same letter, Barnes writes: 'there is always more surface to a shattered object than a whole object' (Pender and Setz 2019: 1). I read this as an invitation to a peculiar kind of reading of the surface, in which 'objects' need not be differentiated from, but are intra-active with subjects of experience.

Notes

1. See Young (2005: 151–3).
2. For a more thorough discussion of these means, see Oulanne (2018).
3. The concept was first used by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus (2009).
4. On the difference between 'embodied reader' and 'implied reader', see Kukkonen (2014).
5. She is young, tall, big and beautiful, absent and pale; 'She wore big shoes, and her ankles and wrists were large, and her legs beyond belief long. She used to sit in the corner of the café, day after day, drinking, and she had a bitter careless sort of ferocity with women. Not in anything she said, for she spoke seldom, but she handled them roughly, yet gladly. She was *dégagé*, but you could not know her well' (404).
6. In this case, the dehumanising metaphors used for Dusie can be seen as a productive non-anthropocentric gesture, while their contribution to a queer or feminist aim is less direct.
7. The piece was accompanied by five photographs of the action, with captions explaining each part of the procedure.
8. Djuna Barnes to Emily Holmes Coleman, 8 November 1935.

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